

Charter Schools Are Smaller and Safer

By
Robert Maranto

A young outcast brings a gun to school and murders his tormenters. This time it was in California's Santana High School, but it's really the same old story with the same old plot.

For the next few weeks, media vultures in search of ratings will feed off the bodies of dead and wounded teenagers. Anti-gun lobbyists will argue for more gun regulations, as if the slaughter in San Diego were a legal behavior which more rules would prevent. Pro-gun lobbyists will argue for arming the faculty, as if that would lead to better relationships between teachers and students.

Supporters of character education will argue for more public funding of their pet programs. Of course, Santana High School already had programs to promote tolerance and good feeling, including one called "Names can really hurt us." It didn't work.

But suppose, hypothetically, we actually wanted to make schools safer rather than lobby for pet programs? We already know how to reduce school violence. Traditional school districts build huge schools offering a variety of academic and athletic programs, to provide all things to all people. Unfortunately, as Chester Finn of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation writes, bullying and violence are products of big school anonymity: "getting away with troublemaking is easier if nobody knows the perpetrator's name."

In Arizona, that means that charter schools are safer than district schools. While traditional schools try to serve everyone, charter schools are free to focus on a niche mission, serving a few students rather than thousands. On average, Arizona district elementary schools are nearly four times the size of charter elementary schools; district high schools on average are ten times as large as charters!

Over the past three years I've interviewed more than 200 teachers, students, and principals at Arizona charter schools to figure out why they left district schools. Again and again, respondents noted issues of size, community, and safety.

As a former district school teacher now running a charter school put it, back in her old district "we're sending kids off to cities... we need a bunch of small schools where kids can get a grip on a community."

In many traditional schools, students in search of community self-segregate, and teachers and administrators feel powerless to respond. As one teacher at an arts-based charter school put it, "in middle and high school they [students] start to discriminate...by dress or clothing. Here they can wear whatever they want. They may look really weird but their attitude is polite. There's never been a fight here because we're small and because they are getting the education that they want."

A Mexican-American student lamented that in his old district school "everybody sits and stays within their own group, within their own race. There's a lot of conflict between everybody. Whites don't like blacks and blacks don't like whites, and Mexicans just don't like anybody." The district school had metal detectors and security, but students never felt safe. While his charter school has no security, people of all races get along since "this is a small school and everybody knows each other."

In small charter schools, faculty can nip small problems in the bud before they become big ones. As one charter school teacher put it, small schools have no secrets: “there are only a few students here [so] I would notice if one went out for a smoke, much less for a gun.” A teacher at another charter said that because his school was small, “students know when you’re having a bad day and you know when they’re having a bad day.” A master teacher at charter school for at-risk children found that knowing the troubled students personally was vital “because if you push at the wrong time you can lose them for the year.”

Small size also helps academics. A principal at a charter school for at-risk students said that “my job is to beat into the students the desire that you will go to college, and I can do that, because I’m talking about 60 seniors; in the district school it was 600.” A counselor at the same school tearfully recalled that she retired from her district school because so many of her 500 advisees “fell through the cracks.” At her charter school, “I know them all: I can really help them. If I had been able to do that back in the district, I would still be working there.” More than two-thirds of the seniors at this school are going to college.

Some charter operators started their schools specifically to provide a safe haven. As one put it, when she was bullied in school, teachers said “you just have to learn to deal with it.” In some district schools “it’s accepted that there’s a bully whose job is terrorizing the other kids...What’s wrong with this picture? In my [charter] school that doesn’t exist. What would our society be like if that wasn’t allowed, if the kids grew up feeling safe?”

Unfortunately, like most states, Arizona seems bent on promoting huge schools and discouraging small ones. The Arizona School Facilities Board financially punishes districts which choose to build small schools. Tucson and Maricopa County impose zoning restrictions on charter schools, but not district schools, as if a school with 100 children will cause more congestion than a school of 1,000. There is now a bill in the state legislature to increase the administrative burdens on charter schools. This would force many charter schools to either merge into larger schools, or else close their doors.

State and local governments seem determined to tamper with success. Unfortunately, kids’ lives are at stake.

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